

Interviewee: Albert Campbell

Interviewer: Kelly Clark

Date: February 27, 2015

Location: High Point, North Carolina

**Kelly Clark:** Today is February 27<sup>th</sup> and I am sitting here, this is Kelly Clark, with Mr. Albert Campbell. Mr. Campbell, would you like to tell me a little bit about your life prior to William Penn, like where did you grow up?

**Albert Campbell:** Well that's simple, I'm a native of High Point. I was born here on Fairview Street, 1614 Fairview Street, which is on the south side of town. Now High Point was divided into lots of groups during that era, and at that time I was born at what was called Southside, there was another area called Macedonia, there was another area called West End, there was another area called Eastside.

**KC:** I've heard east side and south side

**AC:** And of course the northern part of high point, which is where this is now, this was always the northern part, you just saw Main Street and got right off of Main Street. But this was woods here, when I was growing up we used to come up and hunt because there was no new buildings here. So I was born here in High Point, and I my first time in school, oh God I don't know what year it was young lady, but I only spent 4.5 years in the school on the south side of town, which was Fairview Street School, and that school is still there today, of course it is a lot different, not only in construction but its academics as well. And then my parents moved from the south side of town to the east side of town into government housing called Daniel Brooks, or we called it the projects. And when we moved there we had to change schools for us, I say us there were three of us brothers here in High Point, one was already moved on to D.C. But we were moved to the east side town and we were registered in the middle of the year, Christmas, into Leonard Street School. Fairview Street School was the elementary school on the south side, and Leonard Street School was the elementary school on the east side of town. They were the only two elementary schools in the black community in High Point. There were others, Emma Blair and Ada Blair, other schools, but of course Fairview and Leonard are the only two black schools. We moved over there and I was in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, half of the year in Fairview Street and the other half in Leonard Street, I had never seen a black male school teacher. I had heard that one was coming, his name was Mr. Forbes, we had heard that he was coming. He was coming to Fairview, but we moved from Fairview over to Leonard Street so I didn't get to see him, we didn't get to meet him (it was probably years before I got to see him), but when I went to Leonard school the principal was a man.

**KC:** That was the first time you had a male principal?

**AC:** Yes, and that was a real shock because boys even at that age even have a tendency to think that they can do what they want to do, even if they have been admonished by their parents to respect the teacher as well as to respect the parents, but they say go to school and obey them.

[Interruption while man walks into house]

**AC:** So Mr. Whitted was very stern, but was a gentle man, are you both of those at one time? I don't know, but he had his rules and regulations and he expected everyone to abide by them. So I'll never forget when my mom was registering us over there at the Leonard Street School. He asked where is your husband, and my daddy was one of those men who didn't particularly care about academics, he wanted those boys need to learn how to plow, how to work, how to do something with their hands. So momma said he's outside, and he's standing out front of the school, he's out there smoking cigarettes. And of course Mr. Whitted said I understand, but tell him that I want him to understand that his children are my children when they are in the school, and if they do wrong I will whip them, and if he doesn't like it I will whip him. I'll never forget that, Mr. Whitted will never whip my daddy, not my daddy. But anyway that was the real transition for me in life because I had grown up on Fairview Street, West Willard Street really, but the neighborhood there, and on the south side of town on Fairview Street and West Willard Street, was relative to project living was exclusively. People had their own houses, and of course it wasn't like apartment dwellings. So when we moved from Fairview Street to the east side, it was a real awakening to me because we were two inches of apart of wall from our neighbors, with the building, the people adjacent to you, whereas on Fairview Street there was a yard and you played out in the yard and east side of town you played at the playground, which was best for us as children and which was best for us to learn and know each other. So that transition sort of stymied me for a short period of time until I learned what was called learn the ropes. You learn to get along with everyone in the surrounding area. We were on the south side of town, we were the only two children, well my baby brother he was 5 years younger so as far as we were concerned he didn't even exist, we were in private homes and yards and adults, all were adults, there were no other children. When we moved to the projects there were children everywhere. It was like someone rang the bell. It stymied me for a while, but then as time went on I began to associate and get to know other children. And what I didn't realize there was a second cousin of ours who lived across the driveway in another building, and my mother knew about it but we didn't know about it. That was the first big transition for me. Then we were there at Leonard Street School for only a year and half, the second half of our year in fifth grade and then the whole sixth grade. Leonard street had only six grades, Fairview had seven. The Fairview students stayed in school until they were in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, actually on to they passed on to the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, at Leonard street we only had 6<sup>th</sup> grade, so we were passed on to William Penn in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade.

**KC:** Oh, so William Penn for only the Leonard Street students started at the seventh grade, or did you move into 8<sup>th</sup> grade?

**AC:** I'm not sure I understand your question there.

**KC:** So William Penn for you started at 7<sup>th</sup> grade?

**AC:** Yes. William Penn, it was always called William Penn High School, but so when you went to William Penn from Leonard Street you were in high school, and that was a new transition and of course you had to make that sort of adjustment. So we had some kids from Leonard Street in William Penn who were in seventh grade, and other kids from south side and they were in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, that was another transaction we had to make, we had to make that adjustment. And the teachers did a marvelous job of coordinating us without being contentious with each other, because 6<sup>th</sup> graders are not supposed to be with 7<sup>th</sup> graders and so on. But anyway we made that transition, now with that I guess the rest of my school years in William Penn were probably just about the same with everybody else. William Penn High School was called a normal and industrial school. It was beginning for black kids because there was no facilities for education for black children. And the Quakers were instrumental in developing William Penn, course the name comes from that. So as we tried to get along with each other there was a stigma in High Point, south side, east side, west side, west end, the facilities that are still here in high point that was we went to it in the summer time, Washington Terrace Park, now of course its been renovaded and rebuilt really, but you go to the park, it was our parents' babysitter. Our parents went to work and they took us to the park, they gave us a quarter cause it was only nine cents to go swimming and you had the rest to buy a coke and a hot dog, so we went to the park. So did the kids from the south side of town and the east side of town, west end, and there was that stigma, oh he's from the projects, oh he's from west end or what was called burns hill, oh he's from south side, and it caused conflictions between the persons, so we were always against each other, even in school you were against each other, if you were in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade and somebody from Fairview street was in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and you were in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade and came from the projects, there was contention there, you just didn't belong. So everybody went to the park in the summertime because it was our parents' babysitting service, but the children fought over there all the time. I you were alone and you were from the south side of town and you came around from one side of the swimming pool or wherever you were and you met some east side boys, well you know the rest of that story, there was going to be a fight. So that was the real foundation for High Point's attitude as it is even today. We just never really got along and on top of all of that that contention was the race issue, and you had several elementary white schools and only two black schools, you only had one senior high school in High Point for white kids

**KC:** Was that Central?

**AC:** Yes. It's called Central High School, but at the time it was called High Point High school until Arkansas, what was the controversial community in Arkansas, the capital of Arkansas?

**KC:** Little Rock

**AC:** Little Rock. Its school name was Central High School, and High Point's high school was called High Point High School because it was not a central high school it was just for white people but black people had to go to William Penn so as time went on we had to

learn the difference and of course the press finally saw it so the wisdom in renaming High Point High School to High Point Central High School because William Penn was eventually going to be phased out, and it eventually was, to being replaced with T. Wingate Andrews High School and of course I was not there I didn't attend Andrews high school, I graduated from William Penn in the year of 53, and of course William Penn was still there 4/5 years after that. So that contention kept High Point always against each other, you were against each other from the location you lived in in, you were against each other because of your skin color. It was always a joy to go over to Clara Cox Apartments. Now Clara Cox Apartments was always a government facility that built houses like Daniel Brooks. Clara Cox was on one side of the railroad and it was for white people. Daniel Brooks was on the other side and it was for black people. And we could always have a fight there; we could always go to the railroad and throw rocks at each other, and that's how silly life was, that's how contentious it was. So High Point really has never overcome its contentions that were rooted within High Point and they began of course with factory owners. High Point used to be named the hosiery and furniture capital, one was just as important as the other. You have names at your school, Millises, Amoses they owned they hosiery companies that made socks and stockings all over the world. And so you had the rich people in High Point who were doing things politically that would enhance their businesses, and it hurt the poor people. Hayworth Chapel at HPU, they were furniture manufacturing family, they had two daughters, they named them the factory Alma Desk and Myrtle Desk after their daughters. They had a son named Charles, they had two others sons. Charles became the owner of Hayworth Roll and Panel Cmpany that became desktops and wooden panels for the desk company. Well those people were very very rich, and they had no concern for poor people, and so their concern about anything in the community, educationally their concern was for High Point Central, at that time High Point High School. So the poor people of High Point always felt that they were being mistreated by those who had the wherewithal to treat or not treat people, and so you had the race problem and you had the class problem.

**KC:** So for living on the east side and the south side, would you guys combine if you were fighting against the race card?

**AC:** You didn't fight against the race card, the few white people lived up here, no black people lived up here, you didn't contend with white people because you'd have to leave your neighborhood where you were to do so. It was not that they jammed together, it was that poor white people lived up on the north end of town and down on the south end of town on South Main Street, and in between that was the south side where the black folk live. Only a few white people lived in the south side of town that was called Southside, and even fewer lived on the east side which is Burns Holl, which is a cemetery here still has that same name. You had those kinds of things to live with and if you were conscious of them, and some people were and I was somewhat conscious of them, and I was more aware of them than I was conscious because you knew that you had to be careful where you went somewhere because there was always that potential of confrontation, either with the white guys, black guys or the going to the south side, or the older guys or the younger guys, it was always that kind of adventure. So when you went to those places you tried to have somebody with you. Now my brother and I, there are four of us brother,

my brother who is 11 months older than I am, he's 80 years old now and I'm 79 and I'll be 80 in July, people always thought we were twins, we used that for an opportunity for advancement. I had him to go with me in many cases and he had me of course we did okay pretty well, but other kids had difficulty, John and Bunk those boys, they go to the park by themselves they might come back home crying because they were alone. I was aware of the contention that was there and here in High Point and I had to live with that. My parents knew nothing about education and it is sad to say that they were more willing for us to go to work then to go to school. So I grew up wanting to be like my dad. I wanted to carry a pocket knife, and I wanted to do work around the house and repair jobs. My brother Jimmy, he wanted to go to school. Where he got it from I have no idea, but he left High Point in September of 53 with 17 dollars in his pocket saying he was going to college and he went. He went to Shaw University, and he spent four years there and he finished undergraduate, and then he went to Gavin Theological Seminary in Atlanta, Georgia. So he became a United Methodist minister, and there was that contention there. Now all the sudden my brother doesn't care for me as much anymore because he's more educated than I am. And that was not only just me but that was the way it was period in High Point. The race problem in High Point had a kind of dominance to where you knew where you belong and where you didn't belong, and your knowledge was stronger in knowing where you did not belong so you just didn't go to those places or do those things. And when I finished high school, William Penn, I went to work for a company named Alderman Studios and I worked there 4 years and I got drafted into the army and I had to go to the army. When I got out of the army I came back to Aldermans and asked for a job that I was back again and then said oh yeah, Al, your job is always here when you're back home were glad to see you back, go to work. I wanted to be a photographer then. A photographer in Alderman studios, all of them were trained at the studio by the chief photographer Irving Black. So they are all white guys because they made big money. So when I came back, I told them I wanted to be a photographer because I had done some photograph work in the army and they said oh no we don't have colored boys for that, and that was the term we don't have colored boys for that photography. One of the reasons is to be a photographer you also had to manage certain accounts, Drexel, Basset, Henredon. And when that was being done you had to take them to the country club. Aldermans was the owner of the country club membership, but their photographers could wine and dine the accountant people at the country club. Well, you know they're not gonna tolerate that, not no black guy, so I said I spent 18 months in Germany belonging to what was called the NATO shield. That shield was supposed to be the delaying element in the event there was a communist uprising in Germany. We were there to die in delaying the communist aggression until backup troops could get there. So we were there for their civil rights, but when I came home I was a part of the other part of civil rights, nobody was looking out for my welfare

**KC:** Were they different? Did you see a difference between their civil rights in Germany and our civil rights here?

**AC:** No, no, no, there was a major difference and we didn't see it. First of all, at the time I was in the army in the 50s, you just didn't see anything but the inside of the truck or gun that you worked on, there was no real socialization. There was some in the

afternoons after 5 o'clock after work if you went downtown and of course when you got to downtown the closer you got into a fight. Because boys will be boys and when you're downtown at night and the guest houses and bars and you get a few drinks on you and you get in a fight. So you get in a fight and you get back to the barracks, and there's guys over your head or under you that you got in a fight with at the guest house. Black eyes, broken nose, and laughing and talking about it, you got the best of me. We grew up that way, so I became very angry with Aldermans because I felt like I'm over there in Germany fighting for their rights here in High Point in the States, and I come home and I'm not worthy of what I have done for the last two years. When we came to new jersey from Germany, we told the taxi driver one night we wanted to go to a restaurant where we could get a steak, been in Germany eating junk over there. So the taxi driver to us to the restaurant and we were so close to Philadelphia, the guy called the restaurant and told the maître-d or the guy in the restaurant to inform him that he was bringing 4 GIs for dinner, 2 in one taxi and the other two in another taxi trailing. Somehow they understood that we were black, when we got there the place was surrounded by police officers. You soldiers when you come back from Germany you wanna raise hell and tear things up? Get back in those taxis and get back to Fort Dix. And we did, we had to, we had no other choice. And in a very short period of time President John Kennedy and Castro had their little skirmish, so I was redrafted and I had to go back into the army again. I was in the army 10 months then, but then of course they dismissed us, and when I got back the civil rights actions had begun, and I couldn't wait to become a part of the civil rights action. And my whole life, my whole expectancy of life, changed and I became and angry person. Because I felt that I had been cheated not because of civil rights so much, but because I thought that I had personally been cheated. And for about two years there I worked very hard on the civil rights movement, and because of that my name became more popular.

**KC:** It is very popular.

**AC:** Well, I can't believe that, to this day I can't believe that, but anyway there was a guy name Ben Cox, he was a minister and one of the Freedom Riders.

**KC:** Yes I just read an article on him the other day.

**AC:** OK. Benjamin E Cox, we called him Ben. Oh by the way when I had to go back in the army the second time, they stationed the whole outfit which was from High point, the 325th Chemical Company, we were transferred down to Anniston, Alabama, and the first thing we were told at Anniston from the post commander, we had formation that Sunday afternoon once we took all our equipment trucks, guns and everything down there we had a formation, and he told us this is a military reservation there is no racial discrimination here etc. etc. etc. But if you go out that gate, you are no longer a soldier and you have to abide by the laws of the land, and if you are locked up there you'll be AWOL here, so you'll have double jeopardy. Anniston, Alabama, unless you know, it was the town where they burned the Freedom Riders bus, and the main highway from Anniston Alabama to Anniston Alabama, I mean the main highway from Fort McClellan military post to go downtown, you had to go downtown for something every now and then, the Freedom bus was sitting on the side of the road rusting. It was their philosophy in

Alabama that any black soldiers that come to Alabama, they need to see this because they learn what will happen to them if they step out of line. So it made you almost paranoid, well I guess you weren't paranoid, we were always sharpening knives and buying guns and carrying guns and even today it's difficult for me to go places without a gun in my pocket. So when I became a magistrate, that was the first thing the superior court judge had told us. He said that people will be angry with you for placing their children in jail, and sometimes you will have to defend yourself. So carry a weapon in your briefcase, and we, that was just a way of life and still is to a great extent. But when I got back from the second time in the army, that was when I got really strongly involved in the civil rights movement. And from that point on my life changed, I seemed to not recognize and not pursue a different lifestyle, it just seemed that I was cast into a different lifestyle. I had no real objective in life I didn't really care what happened, I knew eventually there would be some kind of confrontation and I had to be ready for that confrontation. What's the preparation? Brass knuckles, gun, that kind of thing, so as time went on I became involved, somebody called and asked me if I would be willing to serve on the human relations commission. Now are you familiar with the human relations commission?

**KC:** A little, bit between most of the parties between the NAACP and then like human relations, we've heard a little about it but I'm not too familiar of it, so do you 'want to tell me a little bit about it?

**AC:** Civil service commission was before the human relations commission. Civil service commission was to make sure or to at least offer some support to persons who have been mistreated in the city. And this was civil service commission all over the country. And if you were, particularly if you were employed by the city, and you were dismissed and you felt you were dismissed at work for whatever reason whether it was right or wrong, the Human Relations, I mean Civil service commission would intervene and have an interview, and of course they would make the decision on what should be done. And the Civil service commission had authority to summon people to the hearings. Well, the people in Emerywood, the money people, the factory owners, didn't like it, because if they hired someone and then fired that person, a group of people from out of town, seven men, usually men, who gonna come in here and investigate us and tell us that we have to hire that person back. So they didn't like it, so they got elected to city council, Now at that time High Point was what's called an at-large city council race. That meant that everybody could vote on anybody running for office, it made no difference, no such thing as a ward representative. So in most cases everybody on city council came from Emerywood, 'cause there was no jurisdiction about where they had to live. So they were the strong voters in High Point, black folk didn't vote very much and the few that did they voted like they were told to vote. Buy once that began to happen they disbanded the civil service commission, and once the civil service commission was disbanded, many people were hired and fired all over the city in various jobs were without employment. Eventually time came, we came into what was called a human relations commission. A man in High Point at the time when I was asked to serve on the human relations commission because I had been very vocal about lots of thing particularly civil rights struggles. So I was asked by a member of the city council a lady by the name of Rachel Gray she is dead now but she was on the city council and she asked me to serve on the

human relations commission. I did, and I was there about a year or two then I became chairman of the human relations commission, and that sort of catapulted me into becoming more involved in activities like that rather than sharpening my knife and getting my gun loaded and going downtown to fight. Well, as time went on I became, I went to the civil service commission and applied for a job for the fire department. Now Number Seven fire station is out on Gordon Street out near Five Points. They had just built that station and they were advertising it in the paper that they wanted ten new firemen. And I thought here we go, now is the time, so I went and applied. And the secretary of the civil service commission was a man who hired for that job because it was well paid he was white, but he was not at all intelligent. So when I applied he said, you don't want to be on the fire department, you want to be on the police department. And I said no, you have an ad in the paper for the fire department, and I want a job on the fire department. Well big boy like you ought to, that's the way he talked to you, big boy like you ought to be on the police squad beating some heads, and that was the way they thought of the police department. So he took that exam paper, the test paper, gave it to me and took me into the office, where I was by myself and took the exam. When I finished I took it back to his office, handed it to him, and told him thank you, then started out the door. He said don't you wanna know if you passed the test, big boy? And I said, and I thought he was to send it, I didn't know about those keys over a test I thought it would go some place else and somebody will correct it. So he had put the key on there and said damn boy, you passed it. And I said wait a minute, I spent two years in Germany defending you, and you got the nerve to call me boy. Well boy what do you want me to call you, Mr.? It sort of brought back some of the old memories of the civil rights struggle and so forth and so on. So I said that's all I want to know is that I passed the exam, and he said you will hear from the chief sooner or later. So of course I went out the door and went home. About three or four days later the chief called and told me that he was going to send out an investigation team to check out my background to see if I had any police records you know that kind of stuff that you naturally do that. And of course I went on the fire department.

**KC:** Were you the only African-American man on the fire department at the time?

**AC:** Well there were two of us that applied at the same time, and the same two of us went through the training. When we were finished the training, we had two weeks of training, when we finished the training we were all assigned to different stations. They were not going to put ten new guys at one station. So he was a young fella, he was only about 20 years old or something like that, and I was 25 or something, so they ribbed him too much and he didn't even stay there two weeks. He left and he left High Point, and I don't think Paul has ever come back to High Point, I didn't know him at the time. So my life then became very treacherous, that is my existence did. I was always getting letters, phone calls, people following behind the fire truck I was riding on like they were going to run into the back of the fire truck, 'cause those old fire trucks had a ramp on the back you stood on and a rod you held onto. Well someone come up behind you like they were going to run into the truck and break your legs or something. And there was always those threats, that sooner or later we are going to get him in the fire station, I mean in a burning building, and we gonna leave him in there. So and of course you lived at the station, the



system they had in High Point, so I didn't sleep in the fire station for three years because it was just really too dangerous. So I would stay up at night in the kitchen reading, smoking, drinking coffee, smoking [chuckle] and just very uncomfortable. My wife kept telling me you need to quit that place, you not going to be any good, they gonna kill you [chuckle]. So finally after three years they hired another black guy, and that seemed to break some of the ice and slow things down. But there was a fire off Idol Drive here in High Point, which is off of Westchester. There was a furniture store there, and the guy who owned the furniture store was a North Carolina Senator, and on Sunday afternoon the place caught afire. At the time I had been on the fire department about 3.5 years, and had been there long enough to have some longevity over some of the other guys who had come. And whenever the captain or the driver what they call an apparatus operator, whenever either one of them was out the next person in line would step into their line. That Sunday, that whole week, I was in charge of the Number 7 Station and the fire broke out. When we got up there from where we are up at Five Points, chief met me at Main Street and Westchester. And said take your company around the back, keep the building around there wet, and keep the houses behind there which was in the back of the building, keep them all wet, don't let them catch fire, and don't come around front. Don't you leave your fire station, and don't you leave your firemen and don't leave your engine, stay there around back, don't come around front for any reason. Well what's this all about? So anyway, we did that. So about 6 o'clock that morning was daybreak, chief came around and says glad you kept everything in good condition. See there we lost a fireman last night. I said what do you mean we lost a fireman? A guy named Roy Gay got burned up, and another guy Davidson got his hands burned up. They were all ready to kill you because someone said that some black guys, demonstrators, burned the building down and a firefighter got killed in the process. So God, that just brought back all of that stuff again. and so he said clean up your stuff, pack up your stuff and go back to the station. Al, you leave at 8 o'clock when you get in there don't try to help clean the station up or the truck up let the guys who come in and do it and I will see you later. See me later, what are you talking about? I had never heard anyone tell me that. So about 10 o'clock that morning he came to my house, and Jerry, my first wife, said the chief is driving up into your yard. I guess something really bad has happened. Of course, he came in and she made a pot of coffee. We sat and drank coffee and he said the fire department is pretty angry because some neighbors up in the neighborhood said they saw some black guys from Winston Salem set the place on fire and raced off up North Main Street going back up to Winston Salem and said they are angry with you for that reason. You know what was there to do, and he said Al, why don't you take a few days off and wait until things settle down. And I said no, I ain't going to take any time off. I said I didn't do anything like that, and I don't believe that happened with somebody else. I had nothing to do with it. Well, the guy who got killed was a latest in state at Sechrest Funeral Home with 24 hour security guards on both tombs with two officers at a time, in uniform. But they wouldn't let me stand on guard because they don't want no nigger standing on guard on somebody that he killed. So, and then Davidson whose hands were burned off he was still down at Duke University. His wife had to go to Duke everyday and I put my name on the list that came around that station that I would serve as one of the drivers. I got my own car, my own gasoline, so she wouldn't have to spend her money. They said they won't let no nigger do that. Here is what the assistant chief said, he said "Do you think they going

to let a white women ride to Durham with you as her babysitter.” Well anyway, those are the kind of things that really began to motivate me to do something. So then Model Cities came to town, and I don’t know how familiar you are with Model Cities, but it was a program that was initiated by the President Lyndon Johnson for what was called target areas, communities that were very, very poor or dilapidated and uneducated people. So you went to Model Cities program and you eventually got a job with City Hall. It lifted, that whole black community in High Point was called a target area, and there were a lot of blacks who would have retired just recently who would have never had a retirement program they would have had to keep working until they died. But anyway I became busy at Model Cities with the Democratic Party. And I had never been to a Democratic meeting or a political meeting and I went to a workshop, I think it was about a two-week workshop every night at the attorney’s house, and he taught us how to participate in the political process, campaign precinct meetings. So my wife and I went to our first precinct meeting, and that was a joy for me. I had no idea what a political meeting was like I thought it was what you hear on the news, smoke filled room with cigars and whiskey, but it was a different thing. So I became chairman of the precinct, and eventually I went to the national convention four times. The fourth time I went my wife went, but I went as an alternate and she was a delegate and I went as an alternate. Those are the things that kept seeming like they were moving me in a different direction. And then of course Model Cities asked me to kind of work for Model Cities as opposed to with the fire department, they offered me a little bit more money and I went with Model Cities. As time went on the Democratic Party wanted, well I don’t know if they wanted me so much but they offered me an opportunity to become chairman of the Guilford County Democratic Party. I said no, I have never been an officer in the party, so let me serve a year as the first vice-chair. So I was elected first vice-chair. The people in High Point, the democratic convention in Greensboro, voted against me but the people in Greensboro and the rest of Guilford County voted for me, so with that it really said a lot to the public about somebody named Al Campbell. My name Al Campbell, I was always Albert until I went on the fire department and the assistant chief was taking me around to the station and he said, calling me Albert Campbell, he said do you mind if I call you Al, and I said no I don’t mind. From that point on, I don’t even hear Albert and we are talking about back in the 50’s. But at any rate, I saw a weekly newspaper that I didn’t like, it was being published in Greensboro, and I called the editor and told him I would like to submit some articles and he said fine. So I submitted some articles and he said you submitting all these articles, we need some advertising in High Point, we need to pay for this. So he said he offered me a job, and Model Cities was a temporary thing, it was for five years as demonstration, and your first job when you went to Model Cities was to start looking for another job because in five years those funds were gonna run out. Of course I took the job as the general manager of the newspaper and knew nothing about what I was doing.

**KC:** Did you feel like you were not educated enough, since you didn’t go on to..

**AC:** Did I feel like I wasn’t educated enough? No I never felt I was inferior. I just felt the situations were bad and I needed to be there to squash this stuff. Anyway, I went to work for him, and after I worked for him for about a year he started to getting kinda strange acting and he made a deal with me and I lived up to the deal. He said if you can get an

advertising out of A&P, A&P's grocery chain at that time was big all over the country, but he said if you can get an advertisement contract out of A&P, what he would do for me was give me the 20% of the newspaper, I said okay fine. I got the advertisement, I got the contract, and when I confronted him about what he promised me he said you'll never own any of my newspaper. He said I gave birth to it and I will bury it. So I came back and started a newspaper of my own. I was in the newspaper business, it killed me at the end, and it is kind of funny that we are talking about this. I don't know where I was after I went out of the newspaper business. I had become the president of the North Carolina Black Publishers Association, there were 8 of us newspapers in North Carolina: Wilmington, Raleigh, Durham, Greensboro, High Point, Winston Salem. And the one newspaper in Charlotte asked me to come and work for them down there, I said I am through with newspapers and he said you got ink in your blood you gotta, well anyway I said I'll take advertisements, okay you take advertisements department. So I went and took the advertisement department and I stayed down there until I had a back problem and I had to have surgery. And I was driving a little Volkswagen Beetle to Charlotte everyday, 87 miles down there and 87 miles back. So when I recuperated from the surgery I didn't go back down there. I went out of the newspaper business because it broke me financially and physically and so whatever. And about 20 years later a guy saw me somewhere and said 'Mr. Campbell I got your newspaper.' What are you talking about you got my newspaper? He said I got the first copy of your first two newspapers. And he took me to his house and he had them framed hanging on the wall. And I asked him to let me have them and I would go and make copies, take them to Staples and he did. Now these were just the first few pages, (chuckle while pulling out the newspaper copies) here I am when I was about pretty young I don't know but they made copies of those newspapers

**KC:** Oh wow, this is incredible. Now how long did you, so basically you were in the newspaper business a long time after you were a firefighter and then...

**AC:** I was in what?

**KC:** The newspaper business

**AC:** Nah, only what was it, from '72 to '76.

**KC:** Oh, okay

**AC:** Yes, four years and I had to get out of it. I was broke, I had to mortgage my house, everything. My wife had died, and I was alone, and I mortgaged everything to keep that newspaper going. Of course, and that made me have the owner, but not the owner the editor of the High Point Enterprise. His name was Holt McPherson he for whatever reason, he and I had some of the biggest fights in the Democratic Party but for whatever reason he just loved newspapers, he hated to see me go out of business. He wrote a big article about the Tribunal Aid weekly newspaper when it when out of business and Al Campbell will no longer be in our community and so forth. Those are the kinds of things that caused my name to become popular, not because I was doing something so popular,

and I was not aware of any of that. I was concerned about trying to get something done for, I always said I worked for the cause, not because of the cause. A lot of guys were about civil rights and went there because it was a stepping-stone for them and I didn't see life that way. So when someone would say something about me complimentary, I would look at them like what is your problem, I didn't do that for that reason, and I still don't. I really don't like, that's why I was questioning why you come in here when what's his name called me and told me

**KC:** Dr. Ringel?

**AC:** Ringel yeah. For what? I have had a, I think, a marvelous life

**KC:** I would say so.

**AC:** I never thought it was necessary for me to go to school. Which was the first mistake I ever made, worst mistake I ever made really. Things I did I did because someone needed help and I felt like I was helping somebody. I was giving somebody assistance that they needed, and the next thing you know my picture would be in the paper and there would be an article about it. That's what made me become so popular in High Point

**KC:** You're still popular in High Point

**AC:** I really don't know it, I live up here, and when I say up here that's a terminology that is from my childhood. North end of town is up there. Now I was telling a guy who called me on the phone the other day asking if he had been down on South Main Street recently and of course South Main Street has built up a great deal like North Main Street has built up. But I don't know what it is that people want. People still call me for silly stuff. When I got elected to city council people called me about medical problems and I said I am the same dummy who just ran for office and still got elected. I didn't get a medical education because I got elected to city council and the legal things. And see when I was chairman of the human relations commission every problem people had they had to call Al Campbell because I was the chairman of the human relations commission. But basically I guess I told you everything, about whatever, I haven't told you anything you don't need to know [chuckle]

**KC:** No it has been great, you know that is the thing, you are one of those people that we all knew as soon as we got you to start talking we were going to hear a lot more about you know your experiences. You are a very influential person in High Point and you still are today. At your age, you are still doing things and people still know who you are there are still articles about you. If you type yourself in on Google, do you know how many things come up? Hundreds. Your newspaper articles, your pictures, everything so for us you know it was a big stepping-stone to have the opportunity to talk to you and hear about your experiences because for someone who didn't want to go to school, you have certainly expanded and done some incredible things with your life.

**AC:** Well if that is what you want to call it go right ahead [chuckle]. I don't understand that because the things that I did I think were necessary they were not institutionalized in my mind and I am going to make this kind of adjustment I am going to. People call me, oh and I was president of the NAACP, I'm sorry, I forgot about that. If my wife was alive she would shoot me for that because I was President of the NAACP for about four years, and I went to Miami Florida to a delegation down there at the national convention one year. This is funny now, well it's not funny at the national convention, the executive director and the chairs of the NAACP and we were in an auditorium, I forget the name of it, down in Miami Beach. It is a beautiful place, huge, and he was asking questions and chairing the meeting the issue of the word minority, because everything was always black or colored or Negroes you know and there was a discussion to change the NAACP from colored people to minority and also to do away with racial identification and just use minorities. People could then determine for themselves who is a minority there were two of us on the floor who were opposed to it. Some guy from Mississippi I never knew him and me I was in the other end in North Carolina. We argued so strongly that the executive director turned our mics off. And they ruled to go to minority. In two years I received I don't know how many letter from the national officers of the NAACP, thanking me and the other guy about what we tried to do and the result what was of what happened what we were unable to do. They said there are people who are, and this is what it was phrased like, there are people who are Caucasian race who are calling themselves minorities by venture of them being a wife they are females, they call themselves minorities and they were getting away with federal funds. At that time 1980 people all over this country were making money off of federal funds and contributions, but it stayed in and still is in. That gave me a name to a lot of people around the country. Went to Chicago to a Poor Peoples Convention, I think I went for the city of High Point and just yesterday I saw a lady on television, you might not know her name but I hope you have, her name was Fanny Lou Hamer, she is from Mississippi. She was at that convention in Florida, I didn't get to meet her but went to Poor People's Convention in Chicago and Mayor Daley came to our convention for the City of High Point and after he made his little speech he asked if people had any questions and they would stand up and say where they're from, you know I am Al Campbell from High Point North Carolina. Well a female voice spoke up and she was told to stand and say who she was and she goes my name is Fanny Lou Hamer it took the house down. That convention center must have sat 1000 people but it took the house down. Fanny Lou is dead now but she is the one from the Mississippi Democratic Party to the Freedom Party and she was instrumental in doing that. I never forget that, she said "I want to know Mr. Mayor why you have us to come to this kind of expensive convention and we are supposed to be representing the Poor People's Party? Mayor Daley he was flabbergasted, thinking where we get this fool from? She was always where she needed to be at all times. She had no education, but Fanny Lou would just root it from what is right and wrong. I wrote an article then I will leave you alone in a minute, I wrote an article, I got in a little dispute with the paper so I just told them let's just call it quits, because I had a little contract and lets just call it quits. I don't care I don't need to be meeting a deadline anyway. And so they said okay Al if that's what you want, so that is what we did. Well two weeks later I wrote an article on discussion. I hate the word discussion. We want to have a discussion a national discussion on race, for what? What are we going to say lets be reasonable, what are we going to say? Are we going to try to

find a way to justify discrimination, so I wrote a little short article, a letter to the editor, and I ended up saying there was no point in sitting down discussing anything, just do the right thing. Treat people the way you want to be treated. I went to church the next Sunday and boy they horded on me. I could not believe it. This little old lady, she is a sweet little old lady, she says I just think you should have said that a long time ago. [Laughing]. Yep. I am now retired, and I don't belong to any clubs or organizations, I don't meet any deadlines, I use Mr. Burford who's the principal at William Penn, he ran for office after he retired from William Penn, he ran for office and he asked me to run his campaign for him because at that time I was working for the Democratic Party and I did, I ran his campaign and he got elected. He said everybody has an inside pocket in his jacket you know and has a date book, an appointment book. He called it a heart attack book and he said you all better learn to do something other than get up every morning and see what there is to eat and who you are supposed to have lunch with and what time you are going to have dinner and that is the way I lived for about 27-28 years. But now I wake up and I don't even know what day it is. I don't care, it does not matter. I don't care if it is Sunday or Monday when I get out of bed. I have to really depend on my computer to remind me of you, because once I put those things down in the computer I forget about them. Anyway, I talked enough.

**KC:** Well, thank you. I got a lot of great information and I really appreciate it.

[Began talking again, starts in the middle of conversation)

**AC:** The instrument that pushed me into whichever direction I went. Personally I can't find one. Now I was probably a bad child. I'm pretty sure I was because my daddy died when I was only 10 years old and by the time I was 12 I was already buying whiskey and sneaking drinking whiskey. I don't mean going out to bootleggers to buy whiskey,, because bootleggers would sell to you if you had money. As I looked back over the years, I don't know that anyone had any influence on me.

**KC:** So the school really didn't have teachers that pushed you in this direction?

**AC:** There were a few teachers that I flirted with, and *one* I believe she might have been waiting on me to get older. But one reported me to Sam Burford, the principal, and of course he did what he was supposed to do. My parents didn't have any education, and they didn't know to teach me to want education, to have an appreciation for education. Where Jimmy got his from I have no idea. He writes me letters all the time, and he tells me how he appreciates me and what all I have done. He tells me what I should be telling him. It is kind of funny, we'll go somewhere and he'll say I'm the one that went to college. but he's the one that went to school. I just never was motivated by anything other than when someone was in need, I was always willing to go to help. That motivation started with my fist. My brother Jimmy would start a fight, just to see me get in a fight. And of course I thought that was necessary for me to do that. I didn't talk about football or basketball at William Penn. I played football and basketball at William Penn, pretty good ball player.

**KC:** Yeah, you've got the height for basketball.

**AC:** Well, not now. They got guards my height now [laughing]. I just don't have that kind of appreciation for William Penn that I should have. I went to the Christmas Music, Handel's Messiah three years ago and I hadn't been in that building since John Coltrane's son was there, and I have some pictures around here somewhere of John and his son. I sat there and I looked at that place and thought, "You know what? I spent six or seven years every Friday in this building and there is nothing there that I want to look at and say I am glad that was here because of because of, nothing. There's nothing. I know you looked at me like, this fool crazy. I have not found any motivation that guided me or even influenced me. Everything I have almost done has just been at the spur of the moment. It was what needed to be done right now. What is going to be the lasting effect I could care less.

**KC:** You could have never thought growing up on the project side knowing that you were going to create a name so big for yourself, you don't even realize what it's come to.

**AC:** No I didn't. Since you said that. Have you seen that [showing me a book he wrote: Growing Up in Public Housing]?

**KC:** No I have not. Is this...?

**AC:** The building you see there is the building we lived in when we were kids. That was my room. My mother had these boys with their daddy dead, three bedrooms, she had a bedroom, the boys had a bedroom, and I had a bedroom by myself. Momma didn't want me to be around my other brothers because I was a bad influence. That to me, I was a magistrate and whenever a police officer would bring someone in to testify to try to get a warrant, and the magistrate's job was to try to get the pertinent information from the person. Number one is to get the address, and every time I would ask someone what the address was they would tell me Daniel Brooks or Clara Cox, Juanita Hills, and I thought something is wrong here, Everybody who commits crimes are not residents of public housing. Public housing was not that way when I grew up. So one Sunday I left work, I get off at 8 o'clock, and I went to Daniel Brooks because I want to see what it is like. Because I hadn't been there for years, I drove around the place, I guess. And before I got the back wheels of my car onto the property, the front wheels were there but the back wheels hadn't got there, two prostitutes came to the car, one on each side. And I thought I can't believe this, and I drove through the projects and I said I'm the law you better be careful who you approach, and they just disappeared on me. All the time I was driving through the projects you can see things like cars in wrong places. Those kinds of things did not occur when I was growing up in the projects. That's why I wrote that book Growing Up in Public Housing. You know it was not that way

**KC:** Right. It was different

**AC:** It was very different. It was where you were proud to live. Even though someone else would look down on you, oh he lives in the projects, particularly a lot of the school teachers. They would probably give some kid on Underhill go the line and give them a little bit of space, and put me in the grave. But I don't know I just don't know why I am sitting here confessing to you like this.

**KC:** No, its helpful for us. I mean, we're now working with some of the students who now are the high school students there, even though the school is now for the arts. And you ask them things about this and these students come from all over the place. They don't see the history behind the school. I think a lot of people hear a little bit about all of the stuff, the sit-ins and the first high school sit-in and that kind of stuff. But they just don't understand the way that is. You know they are still in high school and are so young. I mean even for me I wasn't close to growing up then, you know my mom was born in the 1960s, so I have definitely heard a lot about it, but people just don't understand and things have changed so much from the time that you lived in the projects to the people who live there now. It is so different.

**AC:** Is it is not supposed to be different?

**KC:** No, it's not. It shouldn't be different.

**AC:** No, why?

**KC:** It should have been an area where people could come together and be proud of where they come from, and not a place where they think that everyone is looking against them. To say the least.

**AC:** I have two computers back there. One I have had maybe 6 or 8 months, the other I have had for several years. And they are totally different things. My old computer, I have almost forgotten how to operate it because I am trying to acclimate myself to the new one. But the old computer is just not like the new computer. There is just no comparison. I bought a cellular phone a couple months ago because I had to go to the doctor's office one morning at 7 o'clock out on Wendover, and it was pouring rain. And I thought if something happened while I was out here I would have to get out and walk in this rain, and it was cold. And I thought I need a cell phone. First cellular phone I bought, I paid \$700 for. You know one of those big old things. When I listen to young people, particularly children, infants almost. talk about the technology that is available to them, and how well it works and what all they can do with it. And I think I will never even learn what it will do, much less how to do it. Because I don't need to. My time has come and gone, now I will be 80 years old in July. My time has come and gone. I talked to my brother the other day and he asked me about doing something and I said you know what if I live to be 100 years old, I said it will only be 20 more years. So my time has come and gone, let's face it. Your time comes and it goes. Young people don't need to know, except academically, what was. They need to learn what is and what will be. I don't have a lot of nostalgia about the past. Maybe I don't have, maybe I should use the word appreciation, maybe I don't have any appreciation for the past. I don't. William Penn



never meant a whole lot to me, and Leonard Street and Fairview never meant a whole lot to me. Jimmy, my brother older, we were raised in the school together at the same time because the principal thought we were twins, and momma registered Jimmy, he said what about Albert, and mom said take him too. It's best to get him, especially him. But I was made a patrolman, in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, over my older brother, and I don't understand that, I don't have an appreciation for lots of things and the way things go. My father thought that I was the greatest son he had. He thought this guy here is going to be alright, he is going to know how to plow and he's going to know how to change a tire on a car and Jimmy won't ever know anything. So I feel like some things I was involved in I had no other choice, it was just something that was dropped in my lap, but I still feel like I don't have an appreciation for. I don't know very few things. I am writing what I call my memoir, and excuse me for saying this but I named it 'Straight Down the Middle,' and I've said some things in there about my parents that I would never verbalize, but I wrote it. And I am saying the same thing about other people and things in my life. I feel that somebody needs to say it. I grew up being taught to hate white people, but I never knew why. And whenever I encounter a situation where some white person did something nice, right, good or whatever, I would scratch my head and say I thought they were bad people. And if they're so bad, then why is he doing this? And if he is doing this, then he can't be bad. So I never had that basis, I am always confused about many things that go on in life, that's why I was saying about the computer, cell phones, what you are using there. I still remember when the phone that hung on the wall that you dial. I still remember those phones.

**KC:** We just got rid of ours.

**AC:** Is that right?

**KC:** My mom loves that thing, she goes it's just so fun to play with. I am like it is not fun to play with I can't even figure out how to get the freaking numbers to go right. I don't know what you are talking about.

**AC:** Well you know that's her time. I don't have an appreciation for a lot of things that other people, but I almost said I have a lot of anger, I don't have any anger but I have a lot of disappointments. A *lot* of things that happened in my life that should not have happened to any human being. Particularly, since I'm partial to me, they should not have happened to me. But I don't know, as time goes on, I had a guy who lived up there, the third door. Every now and then during warm weather we sit out front and talk, and he would stand out there and smoke, and one day I walked up there and said "Hey Steve, how you been," and he goes "A, I don't know my time is getting short," and I said "What do you mean time is getting short?" He said "I have pancreatic cancer and said I have 60 days to live, they already have made some arrangements for me up at hospice." I said "Really, tell me how do you feel about that?" He said "I'm glad." I said "What do you mean I'm glad?" and he said "I am leaving this cruel old world. I want to leave here." He didn't live but 30 days, they told him 60 days, but he didn't even live for 30 days. At first I wanted to feel sorry for him but when I listened to him and the way he said the fondness with which he said it, I thought this guy is for real. I have a friend who died about a

month ago and we ran around when we were young men. There was five of us and all four of them are dead now and I am the last one. It was like Carlton you should have died a long time ago because his attitude about life was just a real negative one. Steve was glad to go to heaven that's what he said at least, I don't know if he went to heaven. It is those kinds of things in life that I look at in life, and maybe it is because I did not accomplish a whole lot so I look at a lot of other things that are non-accomplishing, but I really I am baffled when he called, about what he wanted, about the interview. I thought, my God they were doing that 20 years ago and they still want to interview and somebody has that somewhere. You should not be here, you should be able to turn a book somewhere and get what you need to. But anyway, I am glad you got your interview.

**KC:** I'm very glad, thank you. I really do appreciate it. That's a lot of information that I get to work with now. I might have to go back and read your book, *Growing Up in Public Housing*.

**AG:** I wish I had one to give you. I wrote three books. I did that because my wife was in the book club and I was going with her because she got out of the meeting at night and it was a location up there near, and I figured well I will just go with her. Then I thought to myself I could write a book. So I wrote a book and it is almost like it was happening in High Point. Then I wrote this little thin book, I really like that book

**KC:** *Recalling the Fun of the Movement*

**AC:** Because there were times in the movement there were funny things happening, lots of funny things happening. Of course Ben Cox, the preacher, he would tell us at the church, that was the motivation station where everybody would sing and get all fired up and get ready to march. And we were not to pay any attention to people who were hecklers on the street, we were not to confront them in anyway. We were not supposed to strike back if they strike. And if anybody has a weapon in here bring it down front and put it on the table. And every night the table would be full of guns and knives, why they brought them with them

**KC:** Yeah, to lose them.

**AC:** I don't know but they did it every night. Still every night someone had some small guns in their pockets. So the guys, the hecklers, would do a lot of funny thing they would call mean and hateful, and we would see the folly in that. You have to try to keep a straight face, not supposed to respond to them in anyway. Because if you laugh, they are going to say something else to try make you laugh, and before you know it you have a conversation going and you have a party going on out there. There were so many things and I am going to tell you this one, it is a little long. One night we always marched from Fairview Street to Washington Street, Washington Street to Main Street. We would go turn right on Main Street and go towards McDonalds and it was still where it is now. But at the time it was just the arches and there were concrete benches and you could not sit down in there. You buy your lunch and come out and sit on those concrete benches. They wouldn't sell black folk food to take outside and eat. So at any rate, we were coming

back from one of the places, well we were actually leaving McDonalds and going toward Center Theatre and we'd always march the same direction. So that night we decided we would march a different direction. The police department didn't know we made a change and we had to register every afternoon by 4 o'clock our route of travel, they called it the parade route. So we told them we're going to take the same route from Washington Street, but we put everybody in cars and took them over to the south side of town to the Congregational church on Taylor Street. We walked up to Taylor Street to Main Street and turned left and went up Main Street. Well when we got to Commerce Street where we normally went to Center Theatre, that's where we usually turn left and go to the police station; we turned right and went to the police station. The police had already told the hecklers where we were supposed to be coming, the old way. But when they came out on Main Street to heckle with us, they went on Washington Street, on the corner of Washington and Main Street, and here we come over from the south side of Town. They had told all the hecklers what streets and corners they should use to block the corners and create havoc. When they were out there waiting on us once the city put the blockers up, the road blocks up, they can't get on Main Street. So the hecklers couldn't get on Main Street to us. They ended up fighting amongst themselves. So it was, that story is in there somewhere. There were lots of funny things that happened during demonstrations. We were always afraid, most of us were always afraid, I don't know what I would have done if someone were to hit me or spit on me. I'm pretty sure I would have done something. But that was what we were not supposed to do. We always laughed and talked at the church after we got back to the church from the march. You know what would you have done if so and so told you like he was going to step into our line of march. What would you have done? Well, you know there were a lot of funny things that happened to me. One night we filled up the old courthouse that would seat 200 people, but about 300 of us were all arrested. Because our whole intention was to get arrested.

**KC:** Right. To fill the jails.

**AC:** So the jails were full the jail, the jail in High Point what they called a new jail, would accommodate no more than 15 people, so they would always take us to the courthouse, and they would lock the courtrooms, and us people would not be allowed to leave. It was a funny thing the police officers, or deputy sheriffs, there wasn't no black police officers or deputy sheriffs. There was about four or 6 black police officers, but there were no deputy sheriffs. And the deputy sheriffs were in charge of the jails, of course, so we would fill the jails up, and then we would start singing. And it would make them so mad. Some of the people in there acting like they are shouting. And they said, "How in the hell can you all be so happy and you are in jail?" [Laughing] And somebody would say "we are not in jail, we are in the courthouse." It was a weird time; it really was a weird time. So I wrote that thing there. A lot of little funny things happened.

**KC:** Yeah didn't do much with your life. You only had a newspaper, you were a firefighter, you were on the city council, you were president of the NAACP for two years, wrote three years. Nah, you didn't do much with your life.

**AC:** Well you see all those things were not my objective they were not my plan, it just happened. I just happened to be standing in the doorway when the door slammed. I don't know. If I had my life to live over again I don't know, I would probably do it the same way. Probably would.

**KC:** Alrighty sir, well I'm going to let you go. I very much appreciate all this time we spent together.